

'I Hoax Indians and Get Rich as Keeper of Their Sacred Fire'

Tribe's Old Belief Aids Henry Kerr to Amass Large Fortune

By Henry Kerr

As told to J. R. Henderson

I AM a quarter-blood Indian. For very good reasons I do not care to divulge to what particular tribe I belonged. I say "belonged" advisedly, for naturally I would not be a member still and be doing what I am and have been doing for the last fifteen years. In other words, I am an outcast from a once powerful tribe.

That you may better understand I will first tell you the story or legend, supposed to have originated with the Creeks, although some ascribe it to the Cherokees, that has held the belief of the Indians for more than ninety years.

According to this legend, some ninety-seven years ago a noted war chieftain of the Creeks, Black Wolf, at his "last sleep," called his braves about him and informed them that the Great Spirit had need of him, and that he, Black Wolf, was to be called away, but only for a certain number of "moons," which in the white man's count would be 100 years.

Fire Kept Burning

Black Wolf appointed a "keeper of the fire," and the one appointed, or upon his death his successor, was to keep the fire then burning in Black Wolf's wigwam supplied with fuel and never allow it to burn out until he (Black Wolf) "returned to his people."

I was educated in the white man's school and I see as the white man does, so of course I have no faith whatever in the "return of Black Wolf." It is just one of many impossible beliefs of the Indians.

But, whatever there may be to the legend or belief, the fire has been burning ever since the oldest white settler can remember. The Creeks, and a scattering few of other tribes, fully expect to see the return of their beloved chieftain at the end of the next three years.

It appears that Red Cloud was the one appointed by Black Wolf to see to the sacred fire, and that upon the death of Red Cloud, some thirty years ago, his successor, White Quill, took charge of it. The "fire tepee" is situated in an almost inaccessible portion of the rocky Spavinaw Hills. No white man, so far as I know, has ever really been close enough to actually see the fire, although the smoke can be seen from surrounding peaks.

How I Entered Valley

Fifteen years ago I, a boy of 18, entered the forbidden valley near by, in search of a good trapping ground. I had been disowned by my tribe—even my parents had driven me out—because of my education and my belief in the ways of the pale-faces.

It was supposed to be an offense punishable by death for

any one—Indian or white—to come near to the sacred fire tepee. But I found old White Quill glad enough to see and talk to any one.

I Take White Quill's Place

I soon found that he, being very old and feeble, was more than anxious to give up his trust. He wanted to go home to a distant tribe and "die with his people," but was held by his superstitious fear of eternal punishment if he deserted.

I had a considerable amount of money, having worked for the whites for some time after leaving school, and soon made arrangements with White Quill to take his place, unknown to the unsuspicious Indians, and carry on his work. This was effected by a liberal "donation" to White Quill of the white man's gold.

Why did I do this, and how did I carry out the hoax? First, because I had discovered that the hidden valley in which the fire tepee was located, several miles in extent, was literally alive with game and fur-bearing animals. While the surrounding territory had been pretty well trapped out, the surviving wild animals had sought greater seclusion and found it in this spot, where no human being, except the old Indian, was allowed to enter. ALSO, I FOUND INDICATIONS OF GOLD IN A SWIFT STREAM IN A FAR CORNER OF THE VALLEY.

I Adopt a Disguise

I had figured how I was to carry out my plan without much danger to myself. I had been great friends with a white man who was an expert in disguises. He had been on the stage, and he taught me the art of "make-up," and how to apply it. After a five-day visit to Oklahoma City, where I found my white friend, I returned with all things necessary for the successful carrying out of the scheme. With the help of "make-up" and the robes of office of old White Quill, and with him to help, I soon became, to all appearances, a second White Quill, age, feebleness and all.

With his pockets lined with many goldpieces, White Quill gathered up his belongings and slipped out of the hidden valley and out of the life of the Indians who believed in him.

My plan was made much eas-

ier by the fact that only two Indians were permitted to visit the sacred fire each "moon."

Indians Easily Hoaxed

These two influential members of the tribes never entered the fire tepee, but simply stood outside and conversed briefly with the keeper, to see that all was well and that Black Wolf's instructions were being faithfully followed.

I knew just when to expect the visitors and never failed to be prepared and inside the fire tepee, with my full regalia on. Having talked to White Quill so



much I could also imitate his voice.

Because of my maternal ancestry the Indian language came natural to me. As it was dark and gloomy at the base of these frowning cliffs the two visitors had but an indistinct view of me, and not the least suspicion was ever aroused.

White Quill being so old and feeble, he was not expected to do much hunting, so that periodically a load of provisions was left at a certain point where the nearest wagon road passed. The things were cached, and it had been the custom of White Quill to pack them off to the tepee after nightfall. Everything consequently seemed to be prepared for my big hoax.

I Keep the Fire Alight

Of course, as the smoke could be seen from afar, I attended to the fire carefully, and well. Though I did not think it at all necessary, I even went through the expected formula of carrying out a portion of the ashes each evening, in the skull of a "sacred bison," and scattering them to the four winds, "that Black Wolf might know that his commands were being faithfully attended to."



Henry Kerr, his wife and baby as they really appear, are shown above at their new location, some distance from the valley and "sacred fire." At left, Kerr, disguised as Red Quill, keeper of the fire, heightens the illusion by keeping his eyes partly shut, in imitation of White Quill's reputed half-blindness.

The fire, having been in the same spot for so many years (the tepee was constructed of tanned buckskin, water and timeproofed by a secret Indian process), the coals would smoulder a long time without fresh fuel. However, in order to "play safe," when I was too tired from other work, each evening before dark I would rake off the ashes and place green pine needles on the coals, thus making a spiral of smoke "shooting to the sky."

Well, the scheme has succeeded for fifteen years. Each winter I have trapped the fur bearers and each summer and fall I have washed the sands of the stream for gold, and I have much of the white man's gold stored away.

Adventure, Gold, Love!

Each year I have slipped away and deposited in a bank my gold and the money secured for pelts. Once white outlaws entered the valley and attempted to rob me, but I had learned well the use of the white man's firearms, and easily stood them off with a Winchester, wounding three of them. They were glad thereafter to leave me in peace.

Three years ago, after having stored away a neat sum of gold, I slipped into Oklahoma City and

married my boyhood sweetheart, herself only a quarter-blood Indian girl. I had only seen her a few times since assuming my new "duties," but she had remained faithful, as Indians are in the habit of doing.

Until a few months ago we lived in our large tent within the confines of our hidden valley. Then, knowing that we would soon be leaving that valley and the sacred fire tepee forever, we gradually moved our scanty household goods and tent to a spot several miles from the wild valley. I purchased a good car and my wife and babe lived in comfort while I finished washing out what gold was left.

I manage to stay with my family each night, but still attend to the "sacred fire," but I much fear that that fire will cease to be "eternal" before long, for my time with it is short. In the meantime I have washed from the sands a comfortable fortune in gold. Another small fortune I have earned from the sale of pelts.

Often I have been followed by both whites and Indians upon my return from a sale of valuable furs in the spring, but always I have eluded my pursuers near the hidden valley.